

Free ride ends on Del. 1; concerns over toll continue

by Dana Loustalot Duncan
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Lt. Governor Ruth Ann Minner said last Wednesday that she hopes Del. 1 will not become "the road to sprawl" but rather a tool to facilitate easier travel for residents and visitors to the state.

A ceremony held on the cold and windy morning of Wednesday, Nov. 17 at the Biddle's Corner toll plaza, south of the C & D canal, inaugurated toll collection along the eight and one half mile stretch of Del. 1.

The proceedings were officiated by Governor Thomas R. Carper and several other state and local representatives.

Plaza attendants began collecting the \$1 toll at 3 p.m. that afternoon.

Also attending were Middletown Mayor Ken Branner, Odessa Mayor Jim Grant and Townsend President Charlie Murray.

Many in attendance were Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) employees directly involved in the planning and construction of the Route One project.

The "Approaching Storm" marching band from Delaware State University provided entertainment for the event which culminated in a parade of vintage automobiles carrying Carper and other officials through the two northbound E-Z Pass lanes.

Borrowing a well-known movie title, Carper said he envisioned the project as "Five Easy Pieces" from Interstate 95 to Dover Air Force Base. He noted that construction was ongoing to extend the road south of Dover and that work would begin next year on the section between south Odessa and Smyrna making it "the responsibility of the next governor."

Carper said Del. 1 would be part of a system of expressways which would one day link the entire northeastern region of the United States.

The Odessa to Scott Run phase is the second of three phases to be completed on what is the "single largest public works project in Delaware history," according to DelDOT officials. The final phase between Smyrna and Odessa is scheduled for completion in 2003.

The new toll plaza features E-Z Pass, an electronic toll collecting system introduced to Delaware in 1998 which allows users to pass through the toll plaza in two designated lanes at the posted speed limit. E-Z Pass users can receive a 15% reduction in cost over cash price on tolls for

two-axle vehicles and additional discounts will be available for High Occupancy Vehicles (HOVs).

However many residents of southern New Castle County believe the nearly completed expressway will be anything but beneficial to their community.

"There was resistance to the toll during the planning stages and those feelings seem to be carried through now that it's here," said Chuck Mullholland, president of the Southern New Castle County Alliance, a citizens action group.

Mullholland recently sent a letter to DelDOT requesting an update to his previous entreaties concerning special toll considerations which he believes should be made for local residents.

"This amount of consideration is not fair," Mullholland said, referring not only to the toll but also his belief that DelDOT ignores the very people it is supposed to serve.

Similar systems are already in use in many major cities in the country. However, according to DelDOT officials, the Biddle's Corner plaza is the first on the east coast to utilize such a system.

Currently Delaware E-Z Pass users can use their tags in E-Z Pass lanes in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Soon users will also be able to utilize the systems in Maryland and Massachusetts.

Many local residents have expressed concern that the toll will lead to an increase in traffic along US 13 and have called on DelDOT to continue traffic studies.

Opinions were split amongst those in attendance. While some said the time saved by traveling the new expressway more than made up for the tolls charged. Others, including some of those who built the plaza, said they would travel US 13 to avoid the new toll.

"I know of only one local citizen who takes the toll road," said Mullholland, "Everybody else takes 13."